

VZCZCXRO3728
RR RUEHMA RUEHPA
DE RUEHDK #2610/01 3030935
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 300935Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY DAKAR
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6739
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 DAKAR 002610

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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR G/IWI, DRL/AE, AF/RSA AND AF/W

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KWMN](#) [KISL](#) [PINR](#) [SG](#)

SUBJECT: SENEGALESE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT DOWN FOR THE COUNT

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Although Senegalese women recently received the legal right to head households and to enjoy the relevant tax and insurance benefits, Senegal's women's movement is stagnating. In a system where the few women in national politics tend to spend more energy consolidating power than using it, female reformers and dissidents find they do not remain in power long, and young women have become increasingly cynical and disinterested in the women's movement. They are increasingly turning to Islam as an outlet, but remain, like so many others in Senegalese society, vulnerable and disenchanted. END SUMMARY.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

¶2. (SBU) Leadership opportunities at local levels have improved for some Senegalese women. Safietou Diouf, Vice-President of the Regional Council of the District of Thies, tells us when she first became involved in politics in the mid-70s, she was one of only three women interested in running for public office. Now, 60 percent of positions in Thies are filled by women, which exceeds the national average of under 30 percent. According to the National Democratic Institute (NDI), between 1993 and 1998, 12 percent of deputies elected to the National Assembly were women. This figure increased marginally in 1998, when 19 out of the 140 deputies elected were women. In 2000, political parties committed to reserving 30 percent of total places in the National Assembly for women, but instead of gaining seats in the 2001 elections, women lost seats. This year, in preparation for the 2007 elections, they are trying to renegotiate the commitment to reserved women's seats from both ruling and opposition parties.

¶3. (SBU) Now, key local and regional women leaders find it difficult to attain national posts. They are held back not only by their status as women, but also, seemingly, by President Wade's preference for the status quo and, in one important case, his insistence on loyalty. In March 2001, for example, Wade appointed Mame Madior Boye as his second) and Senegal's first female -- Prime Minister. This was seen as a breakthrough by many women's organizations and a sign that Senegal was well on the way to complete gender equality.

Though Boye and most of her cabinet were members of his party, Wade dismissed her government in 2002, following the sinking of the Joola ferry with a loss of almost 2,000 lives.

(NOTE: France recently issued a warrant for Boye's arrest on manslaughter charges related to the tragedy. END NOTE.) While never fully articulated to the public, popular opinion attributes Boye's dismissal to failure to implement Wade's decisions without question.

OBSTACLES TO ATTAINING POLITICAL POWER

¶4. (U) Illiteracy and lack of education are major obstacles

preventing women from political involvement. Statistics from UNESCO's 2006 Global Monitoring Report reveal adult literacy in Senegal to be 51.1 percent for men but only 29.2 percent for women. Primary education is free and compulsory for all children, but girls tend to be removed from school early for marriage or work. Senegal's National Agency for Statistics and Demographics has found that, in general, the higher the level of education, the lower the proportion of girls to boys. During the 2002-2003 school year, girls comprised 48 percent of students in primary school, but in secondary school made up only 38 percent of total enrollment.

According to the GOS, 80.6 percent of school-age girls were enrolled in school in the 2005-2006 academic year.

15. (SBU) Educated women find it difficult to overcome social constraints or vocalize dissent with male colleagues and often fail to receive the mentoring that male colleagues typically enjoy. Awa Wade, a leading figure in the opposition Democratic League and union leader, tells us women are often in the dark about where and when a vote will take place or a decision will be made. Moreover, colleagues often make no allowances for familial responsibilities that may infringe on other duties.

WOMEN'S MOVEMENT FADING FAST

16. (SBU) The impact of the women's movement has declined in the last decade. While the number of women's organizations and NGOs is increasing throughout Senegal, they are typically micro-organizations geared to localized economic development or other local issues. There is not much contact among grassroots women's organizations, and they rarely unite to work on substantial issues.

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17. (SBU) There seems to be some disagreement as to why the women's movement is ineffective. Some, like Rahmet Sow of opposition Jef-Jel party, believe the movement is too fixated on theoretical issues and thus alienates "common" women looking for practical solutions to material problems. Others, such as civil society leader Marietou Dia and historian and gender expert Penda Mbow, think that it is a lack rather than an overabundance of theoretical debate that is inhibiting progress. They believe the movement's inability to engage others in the "big debates" about polygamy and family has led to political impotency. This duel of perspectives boils down to which must come first: political/legal gains or economic gains.

18. (SBU) Dia says that the women's movement faces two main problems. First, it is too dispersed and disjointed to unite over issues. Second, young women are no longer interested in politics, jaded and apathetic both toward the movement and toward women who have achieved political success. Everyone we talked to argued there is a growing popular belief that secular authorities, especially politicians, have no moral values and are only out to benefit themselves and their supporters. Islam is becoming more important to women, particularly young women, while political and economic equality with men seems to be growing less important.

THE IMPACT OF ISLAM

19. (SBU) In 2000, shortly after becoming President, Wade announced that his first duty was to his marabout or religious guide--in his case the Khalif of the dynamic Mouride brotherhood. Since then, Islam has become more politicized both in lobbying and in creating or consolidating movements or political parties that yield electoral candidates.

110. (SBU) Social trends seem also to show the increasing appeal of rigorous Islam. Frustration with growing poverty has led many young, educated Senegalese to reject Western values, including the Western conception of women as

independent and equal. Many of the new women's Islamic organizations are being formed by women in universities. Explicit Islamic values are becoming more of a force in Senegalese culture as well. Polygamy, while always accepted, seemed to go "out of fashion" for awhile, but is now said to be more accepted by young, cosmopolitan Senegalese women. The promotion of "Senegalese" mores and lifestyles, frequently associated with Islam by important political and cultural leaders like Wade or Senegalese folk hero Youssou Ndour is on the rise.

¶11. (SBU) Women are an integral though generally backstage part of Islam in Senegal. They send their children to koranic schools (daaras) and are involved in preparations for religious ceremonies and festivals. They are also active in religious organizations that support the marabouts. In urban areas, support is typically economic, given through tithes or other projects that generate cash. In rural areas, voluntary labor may substitute for financial contributions. Women are also involved in gathering money to enable pilgrimages to Mecca.

¶12. (U) These activities provide women with an autonomous space for cultural action and mutual support that is separate from families yet do not clash with traditional identities or values. Through these roles, women are allowed to participate in religious activities and even, in very few cases, achieve religious, social or political power. The women who do become prominent within the religious community are often descended from important religious leaders whose families have been active for generations. Sokhna Mariama Niass, for example, runs an influential daara with branches in Nigeria and France. Her daara has both male and female students, and she says girls comprise typically 10 percent of students in all daaras.

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

¶13. (U) NDI organized a nationwide training program for women in politics from 2002 through 2004. The program had a significant impact, and many Senegalese women still talk about its usefulness. Looking at the numbers, 10 of the 44 ministers, 23 of the 120 deputies, 31 of the 110 members of the Council of the Republic for Economic and Social Affairs, 4 of Senegal's 51 ambassadors, 61 of the 470 regional counselors, 1,133 of the 4,216 municipal counselors, and 1,043 of the 9,092 rural counselors are women.

¶14. (SBU) The GOS recently recognized the legal right of women to head households, providing them with insurance and

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tax benefits. However, women's many legal gains are often not adequately enforced. For example, though Senegal laws prohibit rape and other forms of abuse, these laws are not uniformly enforced, and perpetrators are only infrequently prosecuted or convicted. The story of a victim identified in the media as K.D. provides illustration. On August 24, after more than a year of delay, Ousmane Tamboura, a 23-year-old member of the Senegalese Armed Forces, was tried for raping an eight-year-old girl. Such cases have sparked public indignation and a great deal of press over the past year, but Tamboura escaped lightly. Despite article 320 of the Penal Code mandating a ten-year sentence, he faces a little over a year in prison.

COMMENT

¶15. (SBU) Though some Senegalese believe the country's women's movement has stalled, there are still a few commanding female voices calling out in what they see as the "male wilderness." These women, focused on continuing to push the female agenda and advance women's rights, have been the critical element in ensuring that the movement does not die. They are politically and economically savvy and draw on legal arguments to make their case, enjoying strong support

from Minister of Women, Family and Social Development Aida Mbodj and her predecessor, Awa Gueye Kebe, who is a strong supporter of former Prime Minister Idrissa Seck. END COMMENT.

¶16. (U) Visit Embassy Dakar's classified website at <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/af/dakar/>.
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